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ABSTRACT

Over the past two decades women have demanded greater access to positions in educational administration. This paper presents findings of a study that examined the experiences of women teachers seeking administrative positions in New Brunswick, Canada. Specifically, the paper explored the women's views about leadership and the ways in which they tried to carry out their responsibilities. Data were gathered through interviews with 29 women educators, 19 of whom were in administrative positions. Respondents stressed the importance of teaching, teamwork and collaboration, communication, and the empowerment of others. A review of literature on gendered leadership styles is presented. A conclusion is that although much of the literature suggests that women and men lead differently, it is important to avoid stereotyping. Rather, the educational community must: (1) value the variety of leadership skills; (2) educate school boards and the public as to what constitutes effective leadership; and (3) incorporate women's leadership skills into practice and administrative programs. (Contains 17 references.) (LMI)

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# EDUCATORS AND VISIONARIES:

# WOMEN EDUCATIONAL LEADERS IN ACTION

by

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for the

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St. John's, Newfoundland

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Over the past ten to twenty years women have demanded greater access to positions in educational administration. One of the results of this demand has been a review and reevaluation of previous research in leadership. Scholars are realizing that much of what was previously written on leadership was based on research conducted solely or predominantly on samples of men (Rossler, 1992; Shakeshaft, 1989). Patterns of leadership behaviour and theories of leadership were developed from the male dominated samples. These patterns and theories became part of the rubric of administration and organizational theory and the accepted views of what leadership was---not just male leadership---but all leadership. It is only recently that these theories have been challenged as inapplicable to all leaders. Male and female leadership styles might be different and studies conducted on all-male or predominantly male samples must be replicated with mixed samples in order to determine whether the previous findings apply to women leaders.

## Women Leaders in Action

The data for this paper were taken from a study conducted to examine the experiences of women teachers seeking administrative positions in New Brunswick in 1993 (Gill, 1994, 1995). In-depth interviews were conducted with twenty-nine women educators, of whom nineteen were in administrative positions. Most of the participants were at the beginning of their administrative careers, as either principals or vice-principals. The average time spent in

their current administrative positions was three years but the average number of years spent in teaching was sixteen. There was at least one participant from each of the Anglophone school divisions in the province and rural, suburban and urban areas were represented.

The original study focused on preparation for educational leadership and the existence of barriers to obtaining and being successful in such leadership positions. During the course of the interviews all the women leaders spoke of their beliefs about leadership and how they tried to carry our their responsibilities. While no direct questions were asked about leadership philosophy this subject was raised and discussed by the volunteers. On re-examining the original data it became clear that the women in the study had definite views about the kinds of leaders they wished to be and had visions of the ideal educational leader. It was decided to reexamine the data to explore this theme more fully. As a result, a number of themes emerged. The importance of teaching, team work and collaboration, communication, empowering others and gender differences will be discussed below.

Teacher

All participants discussed the importance of teaching in their careers. They had always seen themselves as teachers and wanted to be involved in teaching in the future.

> I really have always struggled with whether I wanted to make a career out of being an administrator because I'm one of those people when somebody will ask me: What do you do? I always answer, I'm a teacher, because I really feel like that and being a vice-principal in this district means that ninety percent of the time you are a classroom teacher and I have ten percent of my time when I'm an administrator . . . so I really feel much more a teacher than I feel an administrator and I like being a teacher.

Teaching and "being with kids" was all important. As a result, student-based philosophies were developed for the schools. Students were central to decisions. Focus was placed on developing young people and helping students develop such skills as self-discipline and responsibility for working out their own.

> I guess my philosophy today is very much student-based, not that I just think kids should be allowed to unwind. I'm a strict disciplinarian but I believe there is a difference between self-discipline and imposed discipline and I would sooner work to bring them to self-discipline so that I think that they have to take responsibility. . . . We constantly take the responsibility off their hands by trying to resolve it by saying, Well, now, we'll work this out.

The importance accorded to teaching was demonstrated by the priority the principals placed on supporting teachers. Support to teachers was offered in order to break down teacher isolation, to provide opportunities for sharing and to provide peer professional interaction for mutual professional development.

> That gives the opportunity to people so we don't feel they're alone and that you don't have to spend a ton of time trying to find this, that and the other thing . . . and that's what I believe the principal can do by being in and out of classrooms and providing opportunities for teachers to share their successes and so on that it just lets everybody know what's happening.

Administrators spoke in terms of enjoying kids and "loving my work". They believed their administrative responsibility encompassed both the whole school and each individual within it.

> . . . we are a population of expertise right here with our own school. How do we use that to best meet the needs of all the people that are within. I'd like to think that we have a people's school, first and foremost, and you do look at all aspects of children's growth and they all have validity in every way.

All the administrators described their work from a student centred perspective. Their concerns centred around providing maximum benefits for students.

Team Work and Collaboration

Team work, collaboration, collegiality and pulling together for the benefit of students were vital to building a successful school. The school community was perceived as **"our school"**. Achievements were celebrated as **"we did it"**. All belonged to the school and all had important roles to play. One principal demonstrated total staff involvement and a non-hierarchical structure through "round table" staff meetings, with different teachers chairing sessions.

In the same spirit of team work and collaboration, the principals' responsibilities for supervision of instruction became a matter of recognizing strengths and providing support.

> . . . my head just becomes full of the neat things that were going on in the various classrooms so maybe I would be trying to set up a little network with them in the school where by Friday at noon hour . . . we used to have a sharing time at noon.

There was a belief in "the expert among us", that expertise could emerge from within the group and did not need to be hired from outside at great expense. Everyone, including administrators, could learn from the internal experts. In adopting this philosophy principals demonstrated the confidence they had in all teachers and their willingness to treat teachers as valued colleagues. "Side by side, together" characterised their leadership style.

Empowering Others

Empowering others was an important theme. Empowering took the form of delegating

responsibilities for leadership, allowing and encouraging others to take the lead and showing confidence by allowing leaders to emerge. There was a continual search for "the leaders who are already among us."

> I really do believe that if a school has only one leader then it's probably in great trouble because no one can be a leader in everything . . . I have not set up the cooperative learning that is going to occur here next Friday . . . I support it one hundred percent but the initiation was taken by a group of teachers who have been inserviced in cooperative strategies . . . I have great confidence, I'll sit in because I too am a learner.

Teachers were encouraged to chair committees. Administrators worked with those who were first time committee chairs and helped them plan until they felt confident with what they were doing and ready to try on their own. Back up support was available throughout the process.

There was an overall belief in a non-authoritarian stance. These administrators did not appear to be interested in power for themselves alone. They were more interested in sharing with their staff, allowing staff members input into decision-making wherever possible. Such practices demonstrated commitment to empowering teachers and demonstrated that part of the principal's role was to support and develop others.

Supervision was conceived as a way of bringing out strengths and enhancing professional development. By spending time in classrooms principals were able to recognize and identify the strengths in each individual. In this way the administrators were able to support and energize their staffs. By conferring with staff, valuing the input and opinions of

the staff, valuing the expertise of each staff member and supporting each other's decisions, these administrators demonstrated their commitment to empowering the teachers with whom they worked. Supervision became a method of empowering others.

Communication

Communication, combined with teamwork and collaboration, was considered vitally important to success as an administrator. Effective communication with students, teachers, support staff, parents and other administrators was needed for the school to function. All the participants described themselves as people oriented and therefore effective communication was a must. Communication was considered important in solving problems and successful collaboration could only be achieved if it were based on sound personal relationships. The empathy shown towards others facilitated more effective communication.

Continuous Growth and Development

All the participants described the importance of being life-long learners. Three main areas of learning were described: continuous personal professional development through reading professional journals and attending workshops and seminars, being out and about in the school and learning from the teachers and flexibility and openness to new ideas.

Gender Differences

A number of participants spontaneously raised the issue of differences between male and female leadership styles.

> I think I'm a lot less confrontational and more in terms of talking things out and working around the position or explaining why certain consequences have to be

put in place . . .

Differences noted included different communication styles, women, as a group, being described as people oriented, willing to share, more inviting and more attentive to details. The suggestion was made that women found it easier to say "Thank you" and express appreciation.

> Women find it easier, a lot of times, to be inviting than men. I don't think we're as threatened by saying to someone, "I think you did a good job" or "Thank you, I appreciate that."

Women leaders were also seen as less impressed by "position" and authority and more willing to see themselves as part of the group or one of the team. Women were seen as less competitive than men. One caution was raised, that women leaders should not try to "be men" but rather develop their own strengths and make the practice of school administration their own, bringing skills and talents that they possessed into the leadership role.

> I would like to see more women in administrative positions. If they use the skills that women have to make those positions work, rather than try to be men in the position.

Those raising the issue of gender differences spoke of the benefits derived from balance, from having both male and female in the school office. Principals and vice-principals who were currently in such a situation described how each brought a different perspective and a different way of handling things. They felt that by working together, drawing on one another's strengths, a solid team was built.

> I find there's a good balance between having a male and a female persona in administration, whether principal or vice- principal, either one. There are always people you have difficulty dealing with no matter what your style so if there are students in this school that I can't deal with maybe the principal can

> deal with and visa versa. He'll come to me and say, "Look, I just don't know what to do with this kid. I've tried everything and I can't get through to him." And I'll say, "Look, I know this and this about this kid and I think we should handle it differently." And, O.K. we'll do that. It's a nice combination rather than sticking to one method of treating everyone the same.

The women leaders who participated in the study had a vision of administration which was closely aligned with teaching. They saw part of their mission as empowering teachers and building a solid school team. Open communication and solid personal relationships were central to an effective school. In order to be effective leaders they saw the need to learn and grow continuously. They also felt they brought their own skills and talents to school administration and thereby built a stronger "administrative team" with their male colleagues.

It might be argued that there is no way of verifying that this is the way the participants actually operate. Further study is need to verify whether these administrators behave in the way that they say they do. Studies of women leaders' leadership style need to be verified with observation and consideration of the opinions of those who are the followers (Young, 1994). Their descriptions may not match their behaviour. However, the fact that they say this is what they described their leadership in these terms indicates that they see these behaviours as "the way it should be", the ideal behaviours of a good administrator. It is an indication that these women participants visualize good, effective administrators as having these qualities.

**Women in Leadership Positions**

Studies which examine women's leadership styles have provided data which are remarkably consistent with the data collected for this study. Funk (1986) studied sixty-six

female public school administrators in Texas and concluded that female administrators were strong in interpersonal relationships, had empathic understanding of female employees and their needs, were better organized and paid closer attention to detail than their male counterparts and had a "sixth sense" or insight which they used on the job. Helgesen (1990), followed the lives of five female executives, in a replication of Minzberg's study of five male executives and found that the women in her study emphasized a "web of connectedness", building empowerment, relationships, human bonds and communication with the members of their organizations. They practised inclusion and listening, and valued both efficiency and the nurturing of the human spirit. Helgesen concluded that women were willing and ready to let go of the traditional hierarchical structures.

Young (1993) studied curriculum development and collaboration with one hundred and ninety-eight principals, analysing eighteen curriculum development tasks. Staffs with female principals were found to be more likely to work on curriculum development tasks. These teachers were more likely to work together either as a whole staff or in small groups in professional development and instructional tasks than were staffs with male principals. Granier's (1991) study of a principal's communication style found that the woman principal operationalized the best practice in school leadership. She attended to others, practised inclusion and sought to empower her staff. She was a highly visible and effective communicator with strong interpersonal and communication skills. She was caring and supportive and concerned with the whole child. In addition she was an effective teacher with

in-depth curriculum knowledge who was able to build collaboration among her staff.

Joly, McIntyre, Staszenski and Young (1992) analyzed data from three independent studies of female principals. The analysis indicated that concern for individuals was at the core of the principals' work.

Based on the literature reviewed above it could be concluded that women leaders have much to contribute and may have particular skills to bring to educational leadership. Does this mean, though, that there is a specific female leadership style and a specific male leader style?

**Does Being a Woman Make a Difference?**

There is considerable evidence to suggest that female and male administrators do lead in different ways. Rossler (1992) presents an analysis from Loden (1985) which suggests there is a masculine leadership model and a feminine leadership model. The masculine leadership model contains such descriptors as "competitive, hierarchy, rational and talk more" while the feminine leadership model uses descriptors such as "cooperative, empathic, collaborative and team" (Rossler, 1992, p. 15). This model suggests that certain qualities can be attributed to males and certain qualities be attributed to females. Implied, but not stated, is the suggestion that males lead in one way and females lead in another.

Sergiovanni noted that women are under represented in principalships but over represented in successful principalships (Brandt, 1992). In addition, he questioned the technical-rational findings of the effective schools literature and the instructional leadership

behaviour of principals advocated therein, based on the male dominated leadership theories of the past. The preferred style would be the development of a community of professional teachers with teacher leaders. The development of teacher professionalism would decrease the need for leadership (Brandt, 1992).

In a summary of research, McGrath (1992) notes that at one time women were encouraged to "be like men" in order to become educational leaders. The desired "male" qualities included competitiveness, the use of profanity, wearing dark suits and speaking with lower pitched voices. In order to be considered equal to a man it was necessary to indicate that one could be the same as a man. But in today's schools and other educational organizations the skills of climate building and personnel management are essential. Ironically, the areas where men express their need for more skills are the very areas where women are strongest, namely communication, implementing curriculum, curriculum development and teacher evaluation. McGrath (1992) postulates that, as most women administrators have spent longer as teachers before they become administrators than men administrators do, the women have acquired greater expertise and expert information. Women, indeed, have the "right stuff".

Blackmore (1989) developed a feminist reconstruction of organizational leadership. The individual and the group would be empowered, leadership would be redefined as the ability to act with others to do things that could not be done by the individual alone, leadership in itself would be a form of empowerment, not dominance or control and the leader would lead from the centre of the group rather than from the front of others. The false dichotomy between

fact and value, ends and means, derived from the positivist assumptions of "science" would end. No longer would some be considered as privileged, with expertise and experience over others and there would be an end of dualisms portraying women's knowledge and experience and therefore peripheral and in opposition.

As a result there would be a change in what counted as leadership and administrative experience. Skills and experience acquired as a result of participating in "community activities, teaching, curriculum development and child rearing would be recognized. As a result "women's experience in the 'private' sphere, [would be imbued] with equal status to male experience in the public sphere" (p. 124).

There are a number of parallels between Blackmore's concept of leadership and the concept of transformational leadership. Leithwood (1992) discussed the concept of transformational leadership in schools as having three qualities: helping staff members develop and maintain a collaborative, professional school culture, fostering teacher development, and helping staff members solve problems together.

> Sergiovanni (Brandt, 1992) speaks of a similar concept of leadership and notes that Management literature traditionally written by men for men, and its values---individualism, competition---define success in a masculine way versus women, who as a group, tend to be more concerned with community and sharing (p. 47).

However none of this proves that women leaders do indeed lead in different ways.

## Conclusions

Statements made by the women leaders in the New Brunswick study and the other studies mentioned suggest that their concepts of leadership have much in common with those of Blackmore, Leithwood and Sergiovanni. Does this mean that women do indeed lead in a different way and being a woman makes a difference? There is certainly much to suggest that this is the case, but I believe this argument is inherently dangerous. It could indeed be that women do have special leadership skills and these skills are the ones which are needed in schools for the nineties. It may be that women, through their socialization processes, have opportunities to develop or are encouraged to develop certain skills whereas the male socialization process inhibits the development of these same skills. Another possibility is that the concept of leadership, particularly in schools, is changing and the skills which were considered important ten years ago are no longer as important. Because women are relatively new to administration they are learning the new skills rather than the old and are therefore more relatively represented in the group which has new skills.

Literature on the preparation of administrators for the future notes that society has become an informational-technological society rather than an industrial society (Murphy, 1992). There will be a new paradigm of schooling. Schools must be not hierarchical but heterarchical and organic. School leadership will be based not on "power over" but on "power to" with major emphasis on empowerment, the support function and enabling leadership. The major purpose of school leaders will be to nurture learner development and to build

professional caring communities of learners. And these are the very skills which the women leaders in these studies demonstrate.

Although much of the literature suggests that women lead in one way and men lead in another it is important to avoid the danger of labelling or stereotyping women and men. Both sexes can have all the different leadership attributes and there is as much variation among women leaders as there are between men and women leaders. Rather, there is need to value a variety of skills in leadership, including those of team building, empowerment, communication and caring and not just the "tough guy" skills. There is nothing to say that men cannot learn these skills as well or, in fact, that they do not already possess them. It is just that they have never been encouraged with males and there is a lingering feeling that school leaders should be "tough guys". There is also a need to educate school boards on what constituttes effective leadership and a need to educate the general public, teachers and students not to expect certain stereotyped behaviours from their administrators.

Much of the research reported is based on self reports. There is now a need to examine these leaders from the point of view of those being lead---the teachers and the students (Young, 1994). Do the teachers in the school experience the leadership style as empowering? Do they perceive their female administrators as "good listeners" and "people oriented". To date there are no data linking leadership style with student achievement.

Whatever the reasons, there is a need to value the skills and experiences which women bring to leadership and incorporate them in leadership practice. There is a need to ensure that

these same values are presented in educational administration courses in university and in other training programs. Above all, there is a need to promote the value of these experiences with those responsible for hiring future administrators.

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